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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of an introductory counseling course on retention rates of students at Western Kentucky University (WKU). Rates of graduation after 4, 5, and 6 years for 400 freshmen and 474 sophomores enrolled in an academic orientation and preparation course between 1990 and 1994 were compared with WKU and regional rates during the same time frame. It was found that of the 107 freshmen enrolled in the course in 1990, 41.1 percent graduated within 6 years of enrollment, and that of the 101 freshmen enrolled in the course in 1991, 38.6 percent graduated within 6 years. This compares with overall WKU 6-year graduation rates of 39.1 percent in 1990 and 38.8 percent in 1991. Graduation rates for the 32 regional universities in the Southern region, according to "U.S. News College Rankings" (1998), varied from 30 to 59 percent, with a mean of 43.5 percent and a median of 42 percent. Thus the 6-year graduation rates of the freshmen in the study did not differ significantly from university-wide rates, and did not surpass regional rates. Contains 16 references. (MDM)

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Effect of Introductory Counseling Course on Retention Rates*

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Western Kentucky University

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Effect of Introductory Counseling Course on Retention Rates

Colleges and universities pride themselves on the proportion of their students who graduate in the traditional four years, and in order to keep enrollments up, post-secondary institutions are continually formulating plans for the recruitment and retention of first time students. Institutions compete with each other not only for the most prepared and able students, but also for institutional funding which depends, at least in part, on the number of students enrolled (White & Moseley, 1995).

Most attrition takes place during the first year. Cravatta (1997) reports that some schools lose about one third of their incoming freshmen from the beginning of the first year to the beginning of the sophomore year, but White and Moseley (1995) say that although highly competitive schools report 8-12% attrition, schools with an open admission policy or minimal admissions standards can lose as many as 60% from the first to the second year. Graduation rates vary widely by type of institution (private or public) and by specific characteristics of students such as prior preparation, gender, and ethnic group. Students in the upper part of their high school graduating class are more likely to come back than those in the lower rankings, and in general, more students return for the second year at private institutions than at public ones, and at doctoral granting institutions than at other institutions (Cravatta, 1997). Alexander Astin (in Olson, 1996), the director of a 10 year study at UCLA, says that using raw retention rates may create a false impression about retention since some schools are much more selective than others, and better students tend to stay longer wherever they go.

Predictors of successful performance at the college level have to do with how well the student was prepared for college before arriving. White and Moseley (1995) cite

number of academic courses taken in high school and grades in those courses, class rank, GPA, and SAT scores as predictors. Olson (1996) reports that in the UCLA study, 80% of those with high grades and high test scores in high school finished college in four years, whereas only 11% of those with C averages and low test scores in high school finished in 4 years. SAT scores and percentage of applicants selected accounted for as much as 70% of the variance in the six-year completion rates in 55 independent schools in Pennsylvania (Program Evaluation, 1996).

On the other hand, according to White and Moseley (1995), 75% of students who get through the first two years of college without having to stop, continue on with no interruptions, to graduate in four years. Since students who are able to cope with the academic demands are more likely to stay, and academic success in one term predicts success in the next term (Wall & Others, 1996), one thing colleges can do to keep students, is to make sure they are equipped with information, resources and skills necessary for success when they get to college for the first time. Wall and associates found that the retention rates of students who enrolled in remedial courses when they were developmentally behind, increased to equal retention rates of those who had not needed remediation in the first place. On the other hand, those who needed academic help, but chose not to take prescribed remedial courses, had lower retention rates. White and Moseley (1995) maintain that since many students drop out at the beginning of their first semester, schools should not leave their orientation up to the students, but should make sure there is some quality control of the student's first semester, or, in some cases, first two semesters.

Gardner, the director of The Freshman Year Experience at the University of South Carolina says that each new student should 1) form a significant personal relationship with an adult, 2) find out about, and use the academic skills resources available, 3) establish and adhere to a schedule, 4) participate in study groups, 5) get to know faculty outside of the classroom, 6) make healthy decisions about friends and activities, 7) learn how to deal with stress, 8) get involved in campus activities, 9) attend classes, 10) find a good academic adviser, and 11) take freshmen orientation courses (Gardner & Barefoot, 1996).

Although institutions are grappling with these problems, the relationship between specific practices and student outcomes is not clear. In the literature, higher graduation rates are associated with factors such as interaction among students and faculty through advising, counseling, and mentoring (Program Evaluation, 1996; University of Wisconsin, 1996; Gittman & Plumer, 1996). Increasing the number of personal contacts helps to create a feeling of belonging in the college setting.

Schools report a variety of efforts to personalize the experience students have with faculty and other students when they go to college for the first time (Beeler & Moehl, 1996; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Kupisch & Pieschel, 1996; & White & Moseley, 1995). At Oregon State University (Floyd, 1997), the recruitment and retention campaign, called "OSU Connect," includes planned recreational activities like rafting, to help students connect with other students and with faculty. These kinds of activities require special commitment of participating faculty. One-on-one interaction with faculty, and faculty training in mentoring produce a strain on faculty in terms of time and effort,

but, according to Gardner (1998), such efforts pay off because students benefit from contact with faculty.

At Mississippi University for Women (MUW) some of these ideas have been incorporated into a collaborative retention model (Kupisch & Pieschel, 1996) which includes an "Advising Corps" and an advising center. Any student with at least one at-risk characteristic is referred to the advising center. Kupisch and Pieschel attribute the increase in retention from 57.9% between 1994 and 1995 to 88.9% between 1995 and 1996, to their collaborative retention model.

Another feature of the MUW model is an orientation class for students taught by the same corps of faculty. A number of other colleges and universities report similar orientation classes. New York Institute of Technology uses college success classes along with academic counseling, required placement tests, early warning systems for academic weaknesses, and remediation sessions (Gittman & Plumer, 1996). At Oregon State University, in addition to orientation activities, freshmen take "OSU Odyssey" classes (Floyd, 1997). Floyd reports that the combination of activities and classes for new students raised freshmen retention rates from 75 to 80% in one year. White and Moseley (1995) attribute an increase in retention at their "non-residential commuter" type institution to required participation in weekly discussion sessions for at least the first eight weeks of the first semester. Glass and Garrett (1995) studied the relationships among taking an orientation course, retention and GPA and concluded that taking an orientation course during the first term promotes and improves student performance regardless of age, gender, race, major, entrance exam score, or employment status.

At Western Kentucky University (WKU), new students participate, on a volunteer basis, in a variety of orientation activities the week before the beginning of school. The orientation activities include opportunities for students to become familiar with the campus and resources available to them, to meet and get acquainted with faculty and other students, and to discuss some of the issues they will be facing as first time students away from home. A Freshmen Seminar was first introduced in 1996, and has now become a requirement for freshmen. The Freshmen Seminar incorporates many ideas previously mentioned for helping students become connected with others and prepared for the academic and social challenges of their freshman year at school.

Before the existence of the Freshmen Seminar, however, a counseling course (CNS 100) with similar goals and rationale, had been offered for several years at WKU. The objectives of CNS 100 are to help students: 1) develop strategies for the transitions they will be facing at college, 2) develop their relationships with others and feelings of belonging at school, 3) explore and define their own personal values, 4) become aware of, and informed about career choices and opportunities, and 5) develop decision making skills, communication and listening skills, motivation, and self esteem. In addition to class attendance, students taking this course are required to attend several campus events, e.g., plays, lectures, and music events. The purpose of this study was to compare retention rates for beginning college students who took CNS 100 with overall university rates at WKU, and with retention rates at comparable universities in the region.

Method

In the spring semester of 1998, the WKU office of institutional research provided graduation dates for 874 students who had been enrolled in CNS 100 between the fall of 1990 and spring of 1994. Rates of graduation after six years for freshmen in the 1990 and 1191 cohorts (n = 208) enrolled in CNS 100 were compared with WKU and regional rates during the same time frame. University and regional comparison data are based on six years after first entering college. Regional figures are based on U. S. News College Rankings (1998), for which graduation rate is the percent graduating in six years. Regional figures are averaged over classes entering between 1988 and 1991. U. S. News uses the categories established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. According to these categories, Western Kentucky University is classified as a regional university in the southern region.

Since more than half the students enrolled in CNS 100 during these semesters were sophomores (n = 474), compared with 400 freshmen, graduation rates are reported for second year students also. Comparisons after four, five and six years were carried out for among those cohorts having the appropriate number of years in the database.

Results

Comparisons of those enrolled in CNS 100 with all freshmen at WKU are shown in Table 1 for the 1990 and 1991 cohorts. The six year graduation rate for the 1990 cohort at WKU (n = 2215) was 39.1%, and for the 1991 cohort (n = 1973), the rate was 38.8%. Similar six year rates for the 1988 (n = 2305) and 1989 (n = 2204) cohorts were 38.9% and 39.8%, respectively (Fact Book '98).

Table 1

Percentages of 1990 and 1991 cohorts who graduated within six years from first enrollment (includes spring and summer of 1997).

	1990 Cohort		1991 Cohort	
	n	%	n	%
CNS 100	107	41.1	101	38.6
WKU*	2215	39.1	1973	38.?

*Fact Book '97 & '98

Regional mean, range, and median graduation rates, according to U. S. News (1998), are given in Table 2 below. U. S. News reports a graduation rate for WKU of 41%. Six year graduation rates for CNS 100 students were about the same as the University as a whole and were very close to the mean and median of the western region to which WKU belongs.

Table 2

Means, ranges and median six-year graduation rates by region of the United States**

Region	n	Range	Mean	Median
Southern	32	30 - 59%,	43.5%	42.0%
Western	34	22 - 57%	40.5%	41.0%
Mid-western	39	35 - 61%	45.9%	47.0%
Northern	36	35 - 78%	56.6%	56.0%

**U.S. News College Rankings, 1999

The four cohorts from the fall of 1990 through the fall of 1993 were combined to yield graduation rates after four, five and six years where applicable. Table 3 shows these rates for freshmen, for sophomores, and for the two classes combined.

Table 3

Percentage of student who graduated after 4, 5, and 6 years from their first semester in college. Percentages are cumulative.

	n	After 4 years	After 5 years	After 6 years
Freshmen	400	9.3%	30.0%	39.9%
Sophomores	474	9.9%	38.4%	50.9%
Total Students	874	9.6%	35.1%	46.8%

The majority of CNS 100 classes are taught by one instructor. His classes represent 594 students of the 874 total, or 68%. Because he has a large share of these students, a similar comparison was made for graduation rates of his students alone (see

Table 4

Percentage of one instructor's students who graduated after 4, 5, and 6 years from their first semester in college. Percentages are cumulative.

	n	After 4 years	After 5 years	After 6 years
Freshmen	259	12.0%	35.5%	44.5%
Sophomores	335	9.9%	40.0%	49.3%
Total Students	594	10.8%	38.4%	47.6%

Table 4). His rates are somewhat better than those of the group as a whole shown in Table 3, and if compared with rates given in Tables 1 and 2, his rates are comparable to, or better than rates in three of the four regions.

In summary, the six year graduation rates of freshmen in the study did not differ from the University-wide rates, and did not surpass regional rates as expected, since the higher rates of sophomores in the study could not be used in those comparisons. A more detailed study is needed of content and/or methods used in the course to isolate possible explanations of these results for different instructors.

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